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The impact of gender role ideology, male expectancies, and acculturation on wife abuse

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1. Introduction

Hispanics are now receiving greater attention in social science research as one of the nation's most rapidly growing ethnic groups. One important component related to these studies focuses on the process of Latino/a integration into the economy and social assimilation into the society at large. Explanations and techniques for understanding migratory and social adaptation experiences for Latinos/as were analogous to those used to interpret earlier waves of immigrants to the United States. There are important differences in cultural orientation and culturally influenced behaviors which are reflected in higher rates of divorce, mental illness, substance use, and arrests among U.S.-born Latinos, and among immigrants who have extended residency in the United States. One important domain, which may be influenced by these changes, is the family: its structure and functional dynamics. Of special interest is the influence of culture change on interpersonal behaviors of family members; included among those behaviors are various forms of spousal abuse.

Studies have reported, alternately, higher or lower rates of wife abuse among Latino/a families compared to Anglo families (Lown & Vega, 2001; Perilla, Bakeman, & Norris, 1994; Sorenson, 1996; Sorenson & Telles, 1991; Straus & Smith, 1990; Torres, 1991). Based on data from San Francisco residents, Russell (1986) found no difference in the incidence of sexual abuse among Mexican Americans, African Americans, and non-Hispanic whites. On the other hand, Kercher and McShane (1984) analyzed data from Texas residents and found a higher rate of victimization compared to non-Hispanic whites and African Americans. Stein,

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Golding, Siegel, Burnam, and Sorenson (1988) found a lower rate of sexual abuse in Mexican Americans living in Los Angeles compared to non-Hispanic whites. Similarly, Arellano, Kuhn, and Chavez (1997) found lower rates of reported abuse among female adolescent Mexican Americans compared to their non-Hispanic white counterparts. Firestone, Lambert, and Vega (1999) found the mean rate of reported abuse was 50% higher for women of Mexican origin who were born in the United States compared to immigrants. In addition, some research has linked cultural orientation to wife abuse, although the direction of the relationship is ambiguous. Some argue that the stresses associated with the acculturation process may increase the likelihood of abuse (Firestone et al., 1999; Jasinski, 1998; Sorenson & Telles, 1991; Torres, 1991). Others have found that low acculturation may reduce educational attainment and limit occupational choices, and these may be risk factors for wife abuse (Champion, 1996; Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987). It is clear from the literature that stresses associated with lower socioeconomic status, as well as unemployment, are associated with increased risk of wife abuse (Jasinski, Asdigian, & Kantor, 1997; Kantor, Jasinski, & Aldarondo, 1994; Smith 1990; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Because families of Mexican origin have substantially lower mean income levels, higher rates of underemployment and transitional employment (Raijman & Tienda, 1998; Smith & Edmonston, 1997; Tienda & Raijman, 2000), and a younger age structure than do Anglo families (Stiles, Cohen, Elkins, & Gey, 1998), they may be more likely to exist in circumstances which are associated with higher levels of abuse.

Two issues have been associated with these mixed results. First, Jasinski (1998) argues that the lack of consistent findings may be due to using different indicators of culture change. In addition, some argue that group differences among the Latino/a population may impact findings (Kantor et al., 1994; Jasinski, 1998). In addition, the influence of acculturation may be accompanied by changes in the family value system, including expectations about appropriate role behavior for men and women. To the extent that acculturation changes gender role expectations and ideology, there could be concomitant shifts in the prevalence and frequency of domestic abuse. This study examines these relationships between spouse abuse, acculturation, and gender role orientations in a large sample of Mexican-origin women.

2. Acculturation and family issues

A characteristic typically associated with Latino/a culture is a strong identification with and attachment of individuals to their families (Mirande & Enriquez, 1979; Sabogal et al., 1987; Ybarra, 1988). For example, Mexican Americans prefer a higher intensity of face-to-face contact with family members, and view the family as a place of emotional and instrumental support (Keefe, 1980; Mindle, 1980). These “familistic” behaviors could be expected to erode with intergenerational acculturation (Harris, 1980). Research from this tradition often assumes that working class Hispanic women place a high value on the maternal and related domestic roles and that this value preference is reinforced by parents and husbands who do not encourage their focus on higher education and career skills (Mirande &

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